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ABSTRACT

Although there are only about 2,000 active speakers of the Hawaiian language, there exists a coherent system of nonverbal behavior which can be identified as Hawaiian and which contrasts sharply with middle class white American behavior. Teachers of Hawaiian children should be aware of this in order to avoid potential misunderstandings in the classroom. Differences in bodily contact, proximity or spatial division of personal territory, relative positions of heads according to social status, personal appearance, posture, the meaning of head nods and facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and nonverbal aspects of speech (intonation, style, etc.) all can cause miscommunication between Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians. The major barrier encountered by Hawaiian children in their daily school lives is the failure of the educational establishment to recognize the validity of those aspects of nonverbal communication which conflict with Western expectations and values. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to learn to recognize and accept these behaviors and incorporate them into the educational curriculum. (Author/GC)

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HAWAIIAN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:

TWO CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

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Hawaiian Nonverbal Communication:

Two Classroom Applications

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BACKGROUND:

The main body of this paper is a description of certain aspects of Hawaiian nonverbal communication followed by a discussion of two important areas of application of this data:

1) the Hawaiian language classroom; and
2) all aspects of the education system which involve students of Hawaiian ancestry.

In order to understand the necessity for such application, one needs to know a little bit about the position of Hawaiians and the Hawaiian language in contemporary Hawaiian society.

Hawai'i is a group of eight populated islands lying 2,400 miles west of California at about the same latitude as Mexico City.[1] Of a population of approximately 800,000, only about 145,000 are of Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian ancestry.[2] While there are no accurate statistics, a generous estimate would be that there are about 2,000 active speakers of the Hawaiian language. Of these about 500 would have learned it as a second language in an academic setting.

A far larger number of Hawaiians retain patterns of Hawaiian nonverbal communication, particularly in rural areas where the Hawaiian population is concentrated. These Hawaiians, who have not assimilated Western values and behavior to the same extent as their more urbanized brothers, encounter difficulties at an early age when they enter the public school system which generally establishes middle-class white American* behavior as the accepted norm. In these cases, research findings on Hawaiian nonverbal communication can be helpful to both students and teachers and administrators in understanding problems which arise with Hawaiian youngsters.

It should be clear from the above statistics that Hawaiian as a spoken language in the community is rarely encountered. Most of the learning and speaking of Hawaiian today happens inside a classroom, as often as not taught by a non-Hawaiian or at best, a non-native speaker of part Hawaiian ancestry. Here again, information on Hawaiian nonverbal communication can contribute to better teaching.

HAWAIIAN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:

With this very brief background I would like to describe in some detail certain aspects of Hawaiian nonverbal communication, particularly those which contrast with the predominant Western behavior. The categories used are adapted from Michael Argyle's article, "NonVerbal Communication in Human Social Interaction."[3] The data was obtained during preliminary research for an eighteen month long project which is still in progress.

1. **Bodily contact.** In general, Hawaiians touch each other more than Westerners do. Touching is most often a sign of affection and friendship, and occurs not only between members of the immediate family, which is the usual pattern with Westerners, but also among the extended family and friends. It occurs between persons of the same and opposite sex and across all age groups. Greetings and farewells are usually accompanied by kissing, even with short separations of only a week or so. Youngsters particularly are required to kiss adult "relatives" who are often family friends accorded the courtesy title of "aunty," "uncle," "grandma," and "grandpa." The sixties' black power handshake has been widely adopted by men and is used in the same time frame as kissing.

Other forms of friendly bodily contact between peers are playful punching, slapping and pinching, either to attract attention or to make a point. Children will often simply lay a friendly hand on an adult they are trying to reach, rather than make a verbal approach. For Western teachers such touching on the part of Hawaiian youngsters can cause discomfort and is often not understood, leaving the teacher with a vague sensation of being pawed at or hung on, and the child with a feeling of having been ignored.

One part of the body not commonly touched by Hawaiians is the head, which is considered tabu throughout Polynesia. The head is usually only touched by parents or older relatives and generally in punishing ways, such as flicking the tip of the ear or side of the head with a fingertip or rapping the forehead with a knuckle. Such action between peers or by inferior to superior is extremely provocative and can easily start a fight.

By contrast, one of the few touching gestures which is natural and comfortable for Westerners is a friendly pat on the head or tousling a youngster's hair. This can occur not only with children related to the actor but can even be done to strangers' children encountered in public places. Although perhaps not on a conscious level, Hawaiians react quite negatively to such behavior, with emotions ranging from a vague feeling of discomfort to resentment and anger and a feeling of physical violation.

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*Hereafter in this paper referred to as "Western."

2. **Proximity**. Proximity refers to how people use space and divide territory. Today, Hawaiian and Western behavior do not contrast sharply in this regard, although Hawaiians may have a tendency to stay a little closer to each other.

However, the system of demonstrative pronouns in the Hawaiian language casts an interesting light on how Hawaiians, at least in former times, viewed space and divided territory. English distinguishes between objects within physical reach of the speaker – "this" –, and everywhere else, "that." Hawaiian divides space differently: objects within the speaker's grasp are labelled **kela** – "this". Objects within the listener's reach are **kena** – "that thing in your territory." Objects beyond both parties fall into a third category, **kela**, "that thing distant for both of us." Thus the English speaker defines only his own territory; the Hawaiian recognizes that of his listener also. Native speakers today still make these distinctions.

This kind of explanation helps Hawaiian language students understand vocabulary in its cultural context rather than as peculiar deviations from English.

3. **Orientation.** This is the angle at which people sit or stand in relation to each other. The major difference between Hawaiian and Western behavior in this regard is the relative of heads.

This aspect is generally not important to Westerners; if anything, in formal situations there is a tendency for the inferior to stand in the presence of superiors, or for standing to be a sign of respect, as in student-teacher, male-female, younger-older interactions, where in in all cases the former is expected to stand in the presence of the latter, thus placing the inferior's head on a level with, and often above, the head of the person who is due respect.

In Hawaiian culture today, the exact opposite is the rule. Younger people are expected to keep their heads below their elders at all times so that the older need never look up to the younger and the younger does not look down on the elder's head. Proper behavior in this respect is taught at a very early age.

In addition, among peers, heads are kept more or less on a level whenever possible. If a number of people are sitting in chairs and someone enters and sits on the floor, everyone else will do likewise. It is not at all uncommon in Hawai'i to see a roomful of people sitting on the floor leaning back against the chairs and couches. Failure to conform is interpreted as being "proud" or "high mucka-muck."

4. **Appearance**. This refers to style of dress and accessories, personal grooming and other matters. Even in an atmosphere as informal and relaxed as Hawai'i, there are expectations of "proper" dress on the part of Hawaiians at social events. Although most country parties are held in people's yards under an awning and often in rainy and muddy conditions, everyone is expected to wear his best clothes and slippers or shoes. Failure to do so is seen as lack of respect and regard for the hosts. Even friends who are helping with preparations will bring a change of clothing and will shower and dress up before joining the party.

5. **Posture.** There are many different possible ways of lying, sitting and standing. Hawaiians in the past frowned on a number of ways of standing quite common with Westerners. Some of these restrictions are now fading, but are still meaningful to older people. Inappropriate stances include: hands on the hips, hands folded across the chest, hands clasped behind the back, and arms crossed diagonally on the chest with hands clasping opposite shoulders. These positions are either too overbearing or thought to bring bad luck. In addition, sitting with legs outstretched and feet pointing at another is considered rude and makes Hawaiians feel uncomfortable.

6. **Head-nods.** There is a marked tendency on the part of Westerners to feel that the meanings of head-nods are universal: up-and-down to mean "yes" and side-to-side to mean "no." For Hawaiians, side-to-side movement of the head **can** mean "no", often accompanied by

protruding the lower lip. However the signal for agreement or "yes" is quite different from English speakers' behavior. Hawaiians raise their eyebrows to say "yes", sometimes simultaneously jerking the head back slightly and lowering the corners of the mouth. This is also the most common way of greeting a friend at a distance (a smile and wave are the Western action) and can also be used in a questioning manner. Hawaiians tend to use these gestures as substitues for verbal utterances much more commonly than Westerners, who often are unsatisfied without a verbal commitment.

Another common Hawaiian head movement often misunderstood by Westerners is lowering the head. When a Hawaiian is on the listening end of a conversation, this position, sometimes with the hand or fingers resting on the forehead and downcast eyes, signifies attention and respect. Children especially are taught to behave in this fashion when being scolded and are not allowed to talk back. Along with avoidance of eye contact, this behavior fits into a much larger pattern of conflict and confrontation avoidance which is central to Hawaiian culture. Westerners who are used to more active feedback in the form of headnods, eye contact and affirmative grunts interpret Hawaiian behavior as inattentive and unresponsive.

7. **Facial expressions.** One of the most common distinctive Hawaiian expressions has already been discussed above, the lifting of the eyebrows (often called the "eyebrow flash") to signify recognition, agreement and questioning. The mouth is also used to express a wide variety of meanings: pursed lips to signify thinking, doubt, not knowing or disagreement, and lips turned down to show doubt or disagreement. One disconcerting thing for Westerners is the relative absence of the social smile in situations where Westerners expect it. This apparent lack of expression on the part of Hawaiians is interpreted as hostility or sulleness, when it is in fact neutral.

8. **Gestures.** Hawaiians have a large number of gestures quite specific to them, and often highly provocative and insulting. For purposes of this discussion however, attention will be limited to those which contrast with Western behavior.

Pointing the finger, particularly at someone, is unacceptable. This is also true in indicating directions. In order to indicate which way someone went, the chin and eyebrows are thrust in the appropriate direction.

In beckoning someone, the finger is never used nor the upright hand. Both these gestures to the Hawaiian are extremely abrupt and rude. People are called to come by placing the hand sideways, palm facing the center or the body, and beckoning with the hand in that position.

9. **Looking.** It is probable that looking is a much more important aspect of nonverbal communication for Westerners than for Hawaiians. For Westerners it serves a myriad of functions, indicating attention, interest, and understanding on the part of the listener and providing feedback and reinforcement to the speaker. In addition, eye-to-eye contact is considered a sign of honesty. Studies show that among Westerners people look about twice as much while listening as while talking.[4]

This is in sharp contrast to Hawaiian behavior, especially in situations involving people of unequal authority. The listener's head is lowered with downcast eyes. Such behavior is indicative of attention and respect and acceptance of the speaker's higher authority. It is ingrained in children at a very early age, along with the idea that silence is the appropriate response in these situations. As noted earlier, this is part of a pervasive Hawaiian pattern of confrontation avoidance.

Since most school contact between Westerners and Hawaiian youngsters are situations where authority is vested in the Westerners, there is an exceptionally high propensity for miscommunication on the part of the Hawaiian.

10. **Nonverbal aspects of speech.** These include prosodic signals which convey meaning, such as pitch, stress, intonation and juncture and para-linguistic signals such as tone of voice, voice quality, and style.

The Hawaiian language, of course, has its own set of prosodic signals and relies heavily on changes in intonation pattern rather than word order to differentiate between statements and questions. It also has four intonation levels as opposed to the three commonly used in English. The fourth level indicates pleasure and is often used in reminiscing; in English, it is reserved to express incredulity and is rare and more apt to be used by women. Both of these distincitve elements of Hawaiian speech have been carried over into Hawaiian English with the result that Hawaiian speakers are often described as ungrammatical because of their inattention to word order, and sometimes as effeminate because of the use of fourth level intonation.

As for para-linguistic signals, there is a quite common style of masculine speech, originally in Hawaiian but now also in English which is rather hoarse, low-pitched abrupt and truncated. To Westerners' ears this generally signals impatience, unfriendliness and sometimes, aggression and is apt to cause nervousness and discomfort. For Hawaiians, however, this is simply one style of speech and may be traceable to certain dialects, although there is insufficient data for such a conclusion at this point.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION OF DATA:

Limitations of time prevent a more exhaustive description of Hawaiian nonverbal communication, but it should be clear from the information presented that there is a coherent system of nonverbal behavior which can be identified as Hawaiian and which contrasts sharply with middle-class white American behavior in some very basic ways. I would like to look now at how this information can be used in the Hawaiian language classroom and in the school system in general.

1. **The Hawaiian language classroom.** Over the last ten years there has been widely increased interest in all facets of Hawaiian culture with a resultant pressure on the schools to produce more-qualified speakers of Hawaiian. This has been difficult for a number of reasons:

1) there is a dearth of trained teachers; those who are trained are often not Hawaiian or are non-native speakers who have not been raised in Hawaiian style;

2) there is little in the way of prepared teaching material beyond the first year college level;

3) until now there has been no attention given to the relationship between language and culture and such matters as nonverbal communication;

4) the social and intellectual climate of institutions of higher learning, including high schools, inhibits Hawaiian behavior and generally militate against the admission and success of students and teachers who act Hawaiian; and finally,

5) there is no community of native speakers where students can go for a year or so of total immersion in language and culture, thereby learning through contact and imitation to speak and act Hawaiian.

It is necessary therefore that nonverbal communication be taught in the classroom as part of the curriculum. How can this best be accomplished? Ideally of course the teacher should be the model for students to imitate, but many teachers themselves do not "act Hawaiian." Even when they do, student and teacher alike often do not identify this behavior as being Hawaiian and specifically appropriate to Hawaiian language speaking situations. The more common view is that behavior by the teacher which deviates from Western patterns is an idiolect of Western behavior and is "just the way he acts." In these circumstances students should be told that the teacher is acting, as well as speaking, Hawaiian, and they should be encouraged to imitate his non-verbal behavior.

For many teachers, however, such behavior is not natural. In these instances, it will be necessary to train the teachers first to recognize and describe Hawaiian nonverbal communication for their students' benefit. As much as possible, appropriate behavior should be introduced along with the relevant language patterns in a suitable cultural context.

This year because my second and third year students had not been given this kind of training, I have used a week-long series of lecture-discussions to focus their attention on some of the more striking differences between Hawaiian and Western nonverbal communication. While it is too early to say whether these sessions will affect their behavior, they were very rewarding in enabling local students to understand some of their own actions and reactions to Westerners and helping Westerners to understand some of the negative vibrations they often encounter. For me, it has been very profitable since student contributions and questions have sharpened my focus, provided new examples, and brought me up to date on some more recent aspects of Hawaiian nonverbal communication.

This last benefit is a reminder that for many Hawaiians today, their own style of nonverbal communication is alive and well and dynamic, growing and changing in the same way that living languages do. And it is this group of Hawaiians who can benefit most from the application of information about Hawaiian nonverbal communication in the entire school system.

2. **The public school system.** The major barrier encountered by Hawaiian youngsters in their daily school lives is the failure on the part of the establishment to bestow validity on those aspects of Hawaiian nonverbal communication which conflict with Western expectations and values. Hawaiian nonverbal communication is not recognized as a valid "foreign language" or a coherent system. Instead, isolated aspects of Hawaiian nonverbal behavior are viewed as unacceptable deviations from Western behavior.

No teacher would react to a student speaking Hawaiian by saying, "Boy, this kid really speaks English funny!" Yet it is very common for teachers encountering students acting Hawaiian to say, "These kids don't know how to act!" – i.e., like proper Westerners. If this initial hurdle can be overcome, and the validity of Hawaiian nonverbal communication as an integrated system can be established, then much can be gained by a discussion of areas of differences such as I have touched on. These discussions should involve both students and teachers, always keeping in mind that Hawaiian students do not necessarily respond in these sessions in the manner expected by Western educators.

There is a major philosophical problem to be posed concerning the goal for which this kind of data should be used. It is a variation of the questions being posed in bilingual-bicultural programs today. Should this kind of knowledge be used to facilitate total assimilation of the Hawaiian by helping him to focus on and eliminate areas of different behavior? Should this information be used to make teachers totally accepting of all Hawaiian nonverbal communication in what is basically a non-Hawaiian setting? Should there be an attempt at mutual accommodation? Are any of these goals practical?

My own feeling is that these questions have highly individualized answers. For me the most useful function this data can fulfill is to increase awareness on all sides of what is happening between Hawaiian students and non-Hawaiian teachers and students. Individual misunderstandings can then be viewed as encounters between non-congruent systems rather than one-to-one conflicts. Such a perspective should serve to defuse the situation and enable the parties involved to work out a mutually acceptable solution within a somewhat more objective framework.

FOOTNOTES

1. _____, *Atlas of Hawai'i,* University Press of Hawai'i, 1973, p.3.
2. _____, *He Hawai'i Makou,* Alu Like, 1978, p. 5.
3. Argyle, Michael, "Non-Verbal Communication in Human Social Interaction," in R.A. Hinde (ed.) *Nonverbal Communication,* Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 246-251.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

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